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Pit Farming in Plainedge

Iris and Alonzo Gibbs

Although not many trees grew on the Hempstead Plains, hedgerows always flourished. They contained wild cherry, red cedar, sumac, briar, grape, blackberry, raspberry, and daylily. In winter, after a cold rain, the wild cherry trees had the blackest trunks we have ever seen.

Every farm that we can remember had individual fields bordered by hedgerows. Quail, pheasants, rabbits, and mice found protection in them during seasons when there were no corn shocks to offer shelter. After a snow, followed by ice, we used to walk up the brushy rise and break the ice crust so that game buried away from the weather could work free. Sometimes a great ring-necked pheasant cock would take off like a rocket to the moon and scare the daylights out of us.

Against these hedgerows, particularly those that broke the northeast and northwest winds, the Ludwig brothers of Plainedge dug their pits in late fall. These holes were about three feet wide, fifteen feet long, and maybe five or six feet deep.

Carrots, parsnips, white turnips, rutabagas, long beets, round beets, heimerscheir, and leeks were the late crops, well-timed to reach maturity before the heavier frosts whitened the fields of corn stubble or winter rye. Once the pits were dug these



Plainedge Field, east of Stewart Avenue, as it looked in 1935 when the Ludwig brother pit-farmed there. Beyond trees is site of present John H. West Elementary School.

hardy vegetables were harvested and carted by horse and wagon to the spot where, as one old Polish farmer used to say, "summer would be buried."

It was the practice to ring off the tops of the beets and cut off the tops of the turnips, parsnips and carrots. Beet stains on the hands could not be washed away, so we could always tell which farmers had been pitting lately.

Although a whole pit was sometimes devoted to a single vegetable, more often several vegetables were placed in one pit,

divided from one another by a partition of straw. Then straw was heaped upon the vegetables, starting below the frost line, and this straw was covered over with soil, until the finished pit looked like an Indian burial mound. During very cold spells, manure would be heaped on the mounds and it would steam in the raw January air.

All winter long, maybe once a week, Fred Ludwig and his brothers drove a horse and wagon from their home on Hicksville Road to the pits on Stewart Avenue. A straw fire was built on top of the mound to soften the soil which had become as hard as concrete. Then with picks and shovels the farmers set to work. Their breaths rose, along with the frosty breath of the waiting horses, impatiently stamping the ground and tossing their heads until the reins slapped against their necks and the harness creaked or jingled.

Out of the pit the Ludwigs would take whatever vegetables the early morning radio reports had told them were bringing a fair price at the Wallabout Market. Then this produce would be carried to the barn and washed in a tub. They would crate it, pile the crates aboard their truck, and cover the load with a tarpaulin, securely tied down against thieves and the cold of winter.

Late in the afternoon the truck would swing out of the farm gateway and rumble off toward market, returning the next day with whatever "the load fetched."

